



Baseline Paper

Urban Youth and Political Violence in Conakry

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I) Objectives

The principal goal of this paper is to inform about the socioeconomic situation of Conakry's most conflict-prone youth. The description of their organization, attitudes and involvement in delinquency shall serve to explain the danger of youths being manipulated and pushed towards political violence. Specific reference is being made to the campaigns for the upcoming presidential elections in June 2010. Finally, suggestions for addressing this problem will be formulated.

II) Gangs and Violence in Conakry

GANGS IN CONAKRY

We will locate the population to be addressed by SFCG's youth project by borrowing their self-designated definition: "ghetto youth". "Ghetto Youth" is a social milieu where youths often adhere to gangs. It is important to note that, different from its negative connotation, a "gang" in Conakry does not necessarily refer to a criminal entity. It may well be a simple circle of friends helping each other out in difficult socioeconomic situations. Gangs are organized groups of young men, usually headed by a *leader*, a *sous-leader*, a *conseiller*, and a *caissier* who is responsible for the communal money fund. Oftentimes, these positions are democratically elected. In many of Conakry's neighborhoods, a majority of young men adhere to gangs, also referred to as "*staff*" or "*structures*". Gangs can have various goals: Some organize concerts and soccer matches in the neighborhood, others are involved in delinquency and drug abuse, some serve as networks for the job market, others sit around a cup of tea and discuss their daily lives, again others evolve around certain artists or leaders.

Gangs vary in size as much as they do in terms of age groups and influence. Five twelve-year-old boys can call themselves a "gang"; however, there are gangs with up to 400 members in their twenties and thirties, which exercise enormous leverage over their neighborhood. When, for example, an influential gang calls for a certain action (be it a political campaign, a concert, or vandalism) it has the means to make sure that their call will be followed by the large majority of young people from their neighborhood. This is due to the respect and power they have obtained in these neighborhoods – either through intimidation or by being an example to others: many gang leaders are intellectually superior to their followers, they counsel and lead them, and therefore take the position of authority over them. That these "ghetto youth" seek leadership and guidance from gangs instead of elsewhere is not surprising since the phenomenon of gangs is strongly linked to the devastating effects of economic hardship within Guinean families. If families lack time to spend with their kids or the financial means to support their kids' well-being they will find it difficult to provide an example of "success" and the moral education to guide them – two elements crucial in youth development. Instead, gangs become an alternative source of socialization, strongly influencing the perspectives of urban youth.

POVERTY AND “GHETTO” CULTURE

The frustration of young males growing up in a social environment of poverty is easily explained. They constantly lack capital, their education is poor, they feel bereft of any certain future, of any perspective on the job market, of any chances of getting married and founding their family. Coinciding with this frustration, they see the riches that are available to others: many politicians at the top of the state enjoy all the advantages they lack, police and military have the power to arbitrarily take bribes at street posts, rich families live close by and proudly display their wealth. This in turn creates a stark contrast that reinforces a sense of lack from the youth. Furthermore, Conakry's youth observe the relatively high general standard of living in neighboring countries such as the Senegal, Ivory Coast, or Mali. On TV, Western series and commercials strengthen the feeling of enormous deprivation.

The young urban poor respond to their situation in different ways. One such way is the reinterpretation of their situation. In order to gain the dignity they lack they attach value to the unavoidable situation of sitting around at a street corner with nothing to do, to smoking marijuana and/or to watching TV in bars, all of which is part of a highly appreciated “ghetto” solidarity. Instead of passively accepting social exclusion, the “ghetto” is being established by youngsters, actively developing their own exclusivity. Whoever wants respect in these “ghetto” communities has to know certain expressions, wear certain styles of clothing, convey particular gestures, and display a tough attitude. Surely, the symbolic upgrading does not improve the concrete situation of deprivation in which the young urbanites are caught.

GANG VIOLENCE AND RECONCILIATION

As poverty determines much of their lives, young Guineans in Conakry oftentimes turn to delinquency. They sell and consume drugs; violence (robbery, vandalism, etc.) is frequent, especially in the so-called “axis” neighborhoods of Hamdallaye, Bambéto, Koloma and Cosa. For many, such jobs are the only expertise they have gained and by which they may gain money.

Yet, the youth's disrespect for the law is not simply a response to the scarcity of resources, in fact, many have given up both the hope and the *ambition* to work honestly to gain money. The image of the *gangster* who tries to gain money by any means in a hostile environment projects a positive light on crime and puts the blame on society. Within this line, crime can thus be legitimized, and casts a long shadow on “society” by directing our attention to the Guinean state where illegal practices are as frequent as in the “ghetto”.

Furthermore, violence and delinquency are related to American rap and gangster movies that have influenced Conakry's youth culture since the 90s. In the early 2000s, for instance, violent confrontations between rival gangs caused thousands of injuries and many deaths. No economic benefits were involved. An imitation of American ghetto culture, these conflicts were about pride and dignity. Slight incidents like competing for a woman evoked baneful conflicts between gangs implying vengeance and retaliatory attacks over months and years. Interestingly, these conflicts have become less since the mid-2000s. Gangs have increasingly initiated unions amongst themselves in order to stop the violence that have negatively affected their neighborhoods. Today, there is a strong motivation to peacefully live together. Some gangs resemble youth organizations or

NGOs in terms of their outlook and mission. Their members are keen to encourage each other on their way towards a job or to counsel each other in terms of how to cope with a difficult situation. The internal organization of a gang itself requires personal management; setting up a concert or soccer match equally trains young people in developing skills as actors taking up responsibility on the societal stage.

III) The Risk of Political Violence

“GHETTO YOUTH” AND POLITICS

Amongst “ghetto youth”, politics is generally regarded as a dirty business – however, a business that they can easily exploit for money.

On the one hand, Conakry's youth (just as the vast majority of the general urban population) perceives bad governance to be at the root of their main problems. Yet, they are different from older generations in their conceptions of politics: inspired by American rap music, many interpret their lives in line with the African American experience in US ghettos. They feel socially, economically, and politically marginalized by a hostile state. Especially in the afore-mentioned neighborhoods, a radical ideology has been nourished where absolute opposition (and if necessary violence) is the only means to achieve political change. This militancy has been obvious during political movements against the Conté government in 2007 which were marked by violence and destruction. Buildings symbolizing the state were vandalized, gas stations and shops were looted. Protest and political opposition went hand in hand with destruction and personal gain.

Exploiting the chaotic political situation is therewith the second dimension of youth's participation in political activities. Historically, political parties paid youth for demonstrating, campaigning, and acts of vandalism ever since they started to compete for power in 1992. Still today, youth's political activism and remuneration are linked in the heads of the young. Because there is money to be gained, Conakry's youth have formed hundreds of associations in the past months. They advertise their campaign support and hope to be hired by as many presidential candidates as possible. The vast majority of political campaigns involve economic incentives instead of political convictions.

A third dimension of political attitudes amongst poor urban youth is a withdrawal from the political realm. Out of a conviction that politics morally corrupts anybody involved in it, being “*apolitique*” is an increasingly thriving posture. After the political movement of 2007 was unable to thoroughly change the political climate in Guinea, many youngsters became skeptical towards any form of political involvement. They prefer contributing positively to their close community (their circle of friends, family, or neighborhood), a position sustained by Reggae and Rastafarian ideologies.

DANGERS OF POLITICAL DESTABILIZATION

The most problematic implication of young Guineans in politics is the instrumentalization of criminal gangs for politically motivated acts of severe violence. Criminal gangs have long exploited party politics to gain money. For example, if a certain party wants to disrupt a meeting of another, gangs can be employed to throw stones or set car tires on fire. Even confronting the army or police during demonstrations is a service for which set prices exist. Gang members are well versed in violence; their riots can provoke dangerous situations of social and political disorder in which various tensions can erupt – be they interethnic or interreligious conflicts, the general frustration of the young population, or the rivalry amongst political parties.

It is thus an imperative challenge for any political actor to prevent political violence in Conakry, especially during and after the critical elections period in 2010. The fight for political power between parties, based mostly on ethnic affiliation, has accentuated the divisions amongst Guineans: 78 of 100 survey respondents reported that they currently feared ethnic conflicts in Conakry. Interestingly, two recent incidents of inter-party violence involved young militants largely of the same ethnic group, the RPG against the P.E.D.N. (both predominately Malinké) and the UFDG against the UPR (both predominately Peul). As parties are still fighting for the same (ethnic) electorate, conflicts are based on inner-ethnic cleavages. The risk of interethnic conflicts on the other hand will presumably rise significantly during the campaigns for the second ballot.

After the elections the danger of political instability is all the more urgent. The popular demands for a rapid economic and political improvement are too high to be fulfilled by the new government. Massive dissatisfaction and multiple social divisions amongst the population might easily be manipulated to contest the new political order.

IV) Project Suggestions

MAIN CHANCES AND CHALLENGES

Targeting and working with “ghetto youth” rests on the fact that this population lies at the heart of the current political conflicts in Guinea. As they are the potential actors of political violence, no other group has as much direct influence on whether or not (or how much) violence will erupt during Guinea's elections. Thus, SFCG's opportunity is to allow them to use their own wishes and interests for the positive development of their country, their desire to be regarded as important and respected actors for a good cause, their hope for long-term economic safety and a better future to employ them as messengers of peace and non-violence.

The greatest risk lies in not reaching the young gang members. Differing from NGO members and youth associations, these young men (and women) avoid official settings, formal conversations or lessons in whatever subject. They will distance themselves from social relations in which they feel inferior or lack sovereignty. And surely, being professional experts in staging adherence to party ideologies for remuneration, they might play the same game with SFCG if SFCG does not appeal to their own convictions. Many of these convictions, however, can easily be used as resources for the project.

RESOURCES: CONVICTIONS AND PRACTICES OF THE “GHETTO”

1) *Ethnicity and unity amongst youth*: Youth culture has largely transcended ethnic barriers. Many gangs are multiethnic; rap groups usually try to rap in different national languages and search for audiences in all four natural regions of the country. Using the image of a united “ghetto youth” battling for a positive change regarding their situation could be crucial as means of awareness raising.

2) *Hopes for a better future*: The young urban generation expresses a strong hope for peaceful elections. Most of them are conscious of how crucial the coming political developments will be – not least for their personal future. Their possible personal gains of promoting non-violence throughout the coming period (even compared to their monetary gains if opting for paid riots) should be pointed out clearly since morals count little in an environment dominated by poverty.

3) *Criticism of politics / desire of becoming active*: Criticism of politics and politicians is a constant theme in the “ghetto.” In fact, the majority of “ghetto youth” avoids discussing politics thoroughly because politics equals the absolute evil and the reason for their misery, a “fact” which is not to be questioned. As youth oftentimes feel they are the victims of the political system it might be useful to appeal to their desires of being active doers and taking up responsibility in their communities. Telling the participants of the project that they are in fact central to the political developments they tend to criticize might facilitate their identification with the project.

4) *Artistic potential*: Music is one of the most important preoccupations of the young urban population. Many popular rap or reggae songs contain lyrics that go hand in hand with SFCG's messages of non-violence and peaceful political participation. Thus, music provides a suitable medium for the young generation to express their hopes and fears regarding their future and the country's development, as well as an alternative to expressing it through violence. As an equivalent of theatre plays during the youth festivals of former SFCG trainings, musical contests would have the advantage of attracting more young people, especially if celebrities of the music scene are invited.

5) *Authority*: The authority of gang leaders and highly regarded rappers can be a very important asset in spreading SFCG's message of nonviolence. If such personalities could be engaged for TV spots in which they express the dangers of political violence and give advice to their followers and admirers (in the language of the “ghetto”, of course), this could be a way of assuring that these groups remain peaceful during the election and afterwards – simply because they will obey their leader.

Certainly, the mentioned convictions and practices have to be understood not as inherent qualities or stable positions of young people but rather as styles or behavioral repertoires. Young urban youth perform various roles (with which they surely identify) but their actions nonetheless depend more often on their economic needs and difficulties. For example, political criticism as rhetoric plays a very important role in attributing the blame for their personal hardships to a corrupt government. Yet, many youngsters support the campaigns of the same politicians whom they condemn in order to get money. Few young men and women execute actions where they themselves change their situation for the better.

Hence, due to a lack of education and a lack of confidence being outside their social realm of the “ghetto”, participants from this realm might be shy engaging in a project that has been born outside of it. This implies both challenges and opportunities. One challenge is that many participants might expect money, especially if the project comes across as an initiative of a rich foreign organization led by 'bourgeois' outsiders who have no idea of what is happening on the ground. SFCG risks being seen as another money source to be exploited during the campaigning period.

Multiple opportunities exist if these challenges are addressed successfully. Perhaps the most promising of all is the possibility that the project will be seen as an opportunity for “ghetto youth” to become actors instead of remaining victims, of their being able to play an important and positive role in a chain of political events that will surely affect their lives. In this way, SFCG's project can become one of the most fruitful youth projects in Guinea. Already, it is important that a development organization address a part of Guinea's population that seems to be forgotten by nearly all official institutions. If addressed with respect and in their own language, an important dialogue could be established that will disclose their potential and motivation to be a positive force in the development of their country.

FURTHER SUGGESTIONS

What exactly does this mean? Without outlining the content of the project, a few further tangible suggestions regarding the general approach might be helpful:

Decentralization

- to meet gangs also in their “ghettos”
- to use their internal patterns of authority
- to have regular meetings with the country director, the focal points and the field officer in order to assure that the project is satisfactory in terms of SFCG's standards – despite being more decentralized than SFCG's former youth projects

Employment

- to interact directly with gangs: to work with a team of people who...
come from the same social environment as the participants or know it very well
who can interact naturally with “ghetto youth” / speak their language
can adapt SFCG's message to the participants' points of view

Documentation

- to use cameras and photos rather than a lot of paperwork in order to capture the results
- to privilege video or tape recording and open-ended interviews over *tests d'évaluation*

Other

- to organize a festival where a feeling of a united “ghetto youth” could be formulated in terms of a contract not to turn to violence and assure a free and transparent election (similar to SFCG's engagement with journalists regarding the documentation of the election)
- to organize TV spots to raise the awareness of the broader young population (see above)
- to convey respect and responsibility to all participants, making the project *their* job